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High-level political forum on sustainable development, convened under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council

Identical letters dated 7 July 2017 from the Permanent Representative of Armenia to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Economic and Social Council

I am writing in relation to the undue politicization of the voluntary national review of Azerbaijan at the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2017.

Azerbaijan abused the highly important process of voluntary national reviews to disseminate a blatant distortion of the history and current state of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution. Blaming the neighbour for its inability to deliver on its own commitments, both domestically and internationally, has become a usual practice for the oil-rich but inefficiently governed Azerbaijan. However, the following examples demonstrate that it is Baku's miserable governance record that should be blamed for Azerbaijan's failure to take proper care of its population.

Currently, Azerbaijan depends on oil and gas for 95 per cent of its exports.[1] Amnesty International observes that Azerbaijan's oil-dependent economy was deeply affected by falling oil prices and the decline of its currency, the manat, by half of its value. Food prices rose without an equivalent rise in wages."[2] The World Bank, meanwhile, notes that "2016 marked a year of economic recession for Azerbaijan. ... Inflation rose to 15.6 per cent annually, driven mainly by devaluation of the manat and rising domestic food prices. Investment and consumption fell sharply due to a deep cut in public investment, banking sector distress and a drop in

[1] See https://www.ft.com/content/b74409b2-be99-11e4-8036-00144feab7de?mhq5j=e1.
[2] See https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/azerbaijan/report-azerbaijan/.

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real income."[3] It further notes that "current conditions do not appear conducive to significant poverty reduction".[3]

According to Freedom House, Azerbaijan remains "a deeply authoritarian State",[4] and recent years saw further aggressive steps from the executive to eliminate all criticism and dissent against a backdrop of mounting economic crisis.[4] The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, an investigative reporting platform, contains dazzling records of the abuse of public funds by the ruling elite of Azerbaijan.[5]

Particularly dismal is Azerbaijan's human rights record. For example, Human Rights Watch delivers a forthright verdict: "Azerbaijan's government continues to wage a vicious crackdown on critics and dissenting voices. The space for independent activism, critical journalism and opposition political activity has been virtually extinguished by the arrests and convictions of many activists, human rights defenders and journalists, as well as by laws and regulations restricting the activities of independent groups and their ability to secure funding".[6]

In 2015, the Committee against Torture expressed deep concern that "torture and ill-treatment are routinely used by law enforcement and investigative officials, or with their instigation or consent, often to extract confessions or information to be used in criminal proceedings" (see CAT/C/AZE/CO/4, para. 8). Those practices constituted an abuse of authority and violated the rule of law with which Azerbaijan had agreed to comply.

The recent report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders lists the extensive systemic problems of Azerbaijan, identified during the Special Rapporteur's mission to Azerbaijan from 14 to 22 September 2016 (see A/HRC/34/52/Add.3). The report outlines serious drawbacks with regard to the civil society environment and the intensified crackdown to which it has been exposed. The political system is reported to be increasingly authoritarian, and corruption is widely perceived to be endemic and deeply institutionalized, permeating all spheres of public life, with entrenched political patronage networks and widespread conflicts of interest closely connected to the political elite. The Special Rapporteur is deeply concerned about the intimidation facing the families and relatives of defenders who carry out their activism from abroad, which in some cases has involved criminal charges being brought against those relatives. The report concludes that, "over the last several years, civil society in Azerbaijan has faced the worst situation since the country became independent" and that the Special Rapporteur was "alarmed to observe that human rights defenders increasingly operate in a rather criminalized and heavily constrained environment" (ibid., para. 111). Furthermore, the Special Rapporteur reports that "human rights defenders are increasingly at risk and do not feel safe because of increasingly restrictive legislation, the lack of access to justice and criminalizing actions by government authorities" (ibid., para. 114).

Recognizing that Azerbaijan's crackdown on civil society ran counter to its commitments, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, an international coalition promoting better governance of resource-rich countries, has suspended Azerbaijan's membership owing to its failure to comply with the Initiative's standards and the values to which it had committed itself.[7] It is the first time that the Initiative has taken this step against any country. Similarly, the steering committee

[3] See http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/187821492616164862/Azerbaijan-Snapshot-19Apr2017.pdf.
[4] See https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2016/azerbaijan.
[5] See https://www.occrp.org/en/corruptistan/azerbaijan/.
[6] See https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/azerbaijan.
[7] See https://eiti.org/azerbaijan.

of the Open Government Partnership, a multilateral initiative aimed at securing concrete government commitments to strengthen transparency and governance, has voted to suspend Azerbaijan owing to unresolved core issues of concern, "specifically regarding constraints in the operating environment of non-governmental organizations".[8]

The number of pages of this letter would have to expand significantly to provide a record of the appalling corruption and human rights violations in Azerbaijan. Human rights organizations and anti-corruption groups, including Amnesty International[9] and Transparency International,[10] have repeatedly called for an independent investigation into suspicious money from Azerbaijan influencing decision-making in international forums. Recently, the Council of Europe has launched an investigation into a corruption scandal involving Azerbaijan.[11] This is yet another demonstration of Azerbaijan's deeply disturbing policies, representing a fundamental impediment to sustainable development in the country.

During the oil boom years, much of the new revenue was spent on extravagant projects and lavish shows of debatable importance.[12] "The military budget was increased to almost $4 billion a year, while other sectors — particularly those key to poverty alleviation and social welfare — received much less investment" (ibid.).

In its voluntary national review submissions, Azerbaijan yet again makes a deliberate attempt to deny responsibility for its policies. In order to conceal its monumental failures, the authorities of Azerbaijan opt for casting blame upon Armenia, propagating hatred towards Armenians in a convenient image of a "useful enemy". This is disingenuous and certainly not sustainable.

The policy of hatred and discrimination against the Armenians conducted in Azerbaijan at a government level has been consistently reported and brought to the attention of the international community. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, an independent human rights monitoring body established by the Council of Europe, in its report published in 2016, says: "concerning the many instances of hate speech directed at Armenians it is obvious that they are part of a policy of hardening confrontation with regard to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh".[13] The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in its concluding observations of May 2016 on the reports of Azerbaijan, expresses concern at the repeated and unpunished use of inflammatory language by politicians regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and at its adverse impact on the public's view of ethnic Armenians (see CERD/C/AZE/CO/7-9, para. 27).

Armenia welcomes the unwavering and continued support of the United Nations system and the Secretary-General for the internationally agreed format of negotiations for the peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict under the auspices of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Consolidated support for the negotiations by the international community is critical in deflecting attempts to pursue mediation

[8] See http://www.opengovpartnership.org/sites/default/files/attachments/OGPSteeringCommitteeResolutiononAzerbaijan-2.pdf.

[9] See https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/5556/2017/en/.

[10] See http://transparency.eu/coe-vote-buying/.

[11] See https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/6523-council-of-europe-begins-internal-corruption-probe-over-azerbaijan.

[12] See http://carnegieeurope.eu/2016/09/23/azerbaijan-at-twenty-five-new-era-of-change-and-turbulence-pub-64671.

[13] See http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Azerbaijan/AZE-CbC-V-2016-017-ENG.pdf.

shopping and lopsided interpretations of the causes and consequences of the conflict.

I request that the present letter be circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 19, and of the Economic and Social Council under agenda items 5 (a) and 6, as well as an official document of the high-level political forum on sustainable development to be held from 10 to 19 July 2017.

(*Signed*) Zohrab **Mnatsakanyan**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative